

Kennecott Repairs Pollution System

Smelter Returns to Operation After Problem at Acid Plant

By Mike Gorrell
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Kennecott's smelter resumed operation early Friday after an investigation determined a faulty valve caused an air-pollution control system to malfunction.

The smelter had been shut down since 2:30 p.m. Monday because the No. 7 Acid Plant was not operating properly. The acid plant's breakdown resulted in the release of dense smoke from the smelter's giant smokestack at the north end of the Oquirrh Mountains. The cloud was visible throughout the Salt Lake Valley late Monday afternoon.

"We hope to never see another breakdown like that," said Fred Fox, Kennecott Copper's environmental-affairs director. "By taking the acid plant down, we essentially curtailed operations. It definitely affected us."

Fox said he did not know how much the shutdown cost Kennecott.

The acid plant is one of two units that remove dangerous sulfur dioxide gas fumes from the smelter and convert them to liquid sulfuric acid, which is sold to other companies for use in industrial processes.

Problems began when an electronically

automated temperature-control element in the valve allowed temperatures to get too high in the acid plant, Fox said. While the plant continued to remove most of the sulfur dioxide gas, the heat prohibited another gas — sulfur trioxide — from turning into an acid solution.

Sulfur trioxide is highly visible, but Fox said it is not dangerous to human health in the low concentrations released from the smelter.

While state air-quality officials acknowledge that sulfur trioxide is not a major concern — it is not monitored for and there is no government standard specifying what concentrations are unhealthy — they are apprehensive about the release and hope to find out more about the sulfur-trioxide emissions.

"Sulfur trioxide is a particulate. It can cause PM10 problems," said Marv Maxell, Utah Division of Air Quality support-services branch manager.

Also known as fine-particulate pollution, PM10 is composed of tiny pieces of soot and dust suspended in the air. They can become lodged in lungs and cause respiratory problems when inhaled in large quantities. Fine particulates are the most troubling form of pollution in the Salt Lake Valley.

"So when [Kennecott] says it's not a health problem it's hard for me to understand because [sulfur trioxide] can be inhaled and

when it contacts water it forms an acidic base," Maxell added.

Air-quality officials hope that PM10 filters on the roof of Magna's Brockbank Junior High School and at Great Salt Lake Marina will help them better understand the effects of the release. But there are doubts that they will.

To the naked eye, the filters look like a thick piece of paper 8 inches by 10 inches. "But if you look at them under a microscope, they are a mesh of fine quartz fibers that trap all the particulates in the air," said division environmental scientist Art King.

Maxell said the filters will be weighed and sent to an Oregon laboratory for chemical analysis, but King is not certain the lab results will reveal much. "How much of the sulfur trioxide will be picked up, I don't know. The filters are not really designed to pick up much of that."

Maxell said he noticed a "small wisp of black smoke coming out of Kennecott's stack" Thursday evening, when the company was starting to get the acid plant back on line. When he looked Friday morning, no smoke was being emitted.

"We had an excellent startup. Everything went like clockwork," Fox said. "The startup did have visible emissions, but they were less than in a normal startup because of all the fine tuning we had done in the past few days."

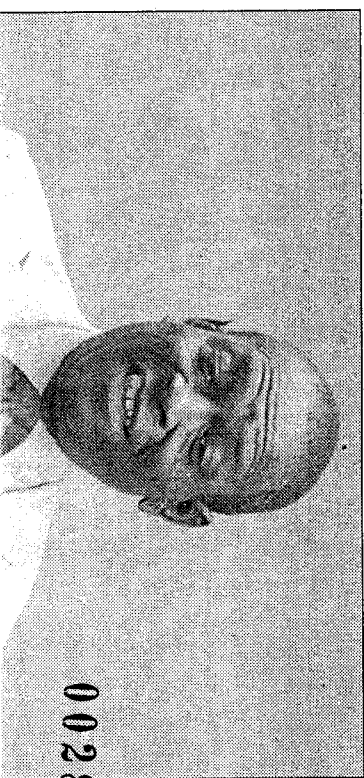
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